

Dismantling Racism and White Privilege: A commentary

Confronting myself and my white privilege

By Brooke Rolston

I'm white. I'm male. I'm sixty.

Only in the last very few years have I started to think seriously about what I've known implicitly all my life: I benefit from living in a culture of white privilege.

Last summer, after a year's encouragement from young people I've worked with, I participated in a two-day workshop at Freedom Church on "Undoing Institutional Racism," sponsored by the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond. There I was made to see that I'm like a fish swimming comfortably in water, seeing a few around me struggling and not understanding that they are like birds trying to live away from the air. The water is my culture. It is all I need to know to flourish. I don't even have to consider why my gills and fins suit the water. Because I live well in this element, I don't have to ask why some, curiously winged and feathered, would be having a hard time in it. If they are, it's an easy assumption that they, the different, must be inferior.

The analogy needs only the shift from the language of fish and fowl to that of white skin and skin of color to arrive at the workshop's teaching about internalized racial superiority. I have grown up and aged in a culture which understands deeply that white is the norm, that other-than-white is the different. And because of fear, the different is less valued.

Shortly after the workshop, "Maafa Suite" came to Seattle's Moore Theater. It is a powerful dramatic production about the slave trade between this country and Africa. The word "Maafa" is used to speak of a great calamity or disaster. And so was the slave trade for black people stolen from Africa and forced into subhuman existence on this continent.

I went to see "Maafa Suite." At the entrance to the theater, I faced a horror. Before I could even get inside the lobby, I heard moans and cries and then saw before me black people in manacles chained to posts. They sobbed and screamed and writhed on the sawdust-strewn floor. They were crying for help. I could not believe what I was seeing. I knew I came to see a play, and something in me was aware that this must be part of it, yet this was too awful. I would have to walk between these people to go any farther into the theater, and I couldn't do it.

I decided I had to find a way to respond to the wretchedness before me. I walked toward a young man chained to the post nearest me, and started to bend over and reach toward him. The horror suddenly became even worse. He screamed louder and tried to crawl away from me, covering his face and head with his hands. From behind his fingers he looked up into my eyes with total fear. For several seconds I couldn't comprehend his reaction to me. And then I understood.

I was white. I was the captor. I was the slave trader. I was captain of the slave ship. I was the one whose skin identified me with the ones in charge of this unspeakable terror. In my naiveté I had thought I could act as I wished and my actions would be transparently received as gestures of good will. I had acted as my white privilege has

trained me to act. Surely in this culture I am free to move, to speak, to be, and everyone around will receive me on my terms. After a few more seconds, I had to realize that my being this close to this man was no help at all, and I had to stand up and continue on into the theater, between the rest of the chained and screaming persons.

The play is moving, wrenching. Yet no clearer image stays with me than that first encounter.

I hope I continue to learn that every action has a context and that I am not an agent free of the racism that privileges me. I have so far to go. Do we all?

Brooke Rolston is a member of the Church Council of Greater Seattle Board of Directors and campus pastor with Campus Christian Ministry / Covenant House at the University of Washington. To find out more about Maafa, which will be performed again at the Moore Theatre July 18-20, 2002, visit www.cityofseattle.net/maafa/about.htm.